Original Paper

The National Security Debacle: Escalating the Bald Conversations on Rural Banditry in Northern Nigeria

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Abstract

Scholarly preoccupation with socio-political development in Nigeria appeared to have dwelt more on the fulfillment of great expectations and much less on the uncertainties of social change brought about by democratization in Africa. Thus, when Huntington reflected on the possibility of reversal following the onset of 'Third wave' in Africa, the emphasis on social conflict is very instructive in the democratization process of many states in Africa. Whereas some democracies have managed to consolidate or are still democratizing, a few others have relapsed into reverse wave or at best, are caught up in what Thomas Carothers described as "The gray zone". In Nigeria for example, after almost a quarter century of democratization, there is rising wave of atavistic consciousness or what Engels described as the "Lowest instinct or passion in man", where the political space is characterized by rampaging non-state actors. In specific terms, the new wave of dramatic reverses relates to terrorist attacks, ethnic violence, armed banditry, farmers-herders imbroglio, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, and unknown gunmen. In the circumstance, marauders and brigands now reign supreme over what is described as ungoverned space, prompting a convergence of expert opinions that Nigeria is fast degenerating unto a failed state. Among the various descriptions of criminal enterprises in Nigeria, there is scholarly preoccupation with the nuances and pattern of armed banditry. This paper seeks to deepen this preoccupation by scoping the infamy of rural banditry in northern Nigeria. It argues that, beyond the much-touted ethno-religious sentiment and convoluted diversity, the worsening human condition occasioned by the increasing parlous governance situation in the country, are more persuasive in explaining the dramatic wave of criminal enterprises. The theoretical perspective of Cohen and Felson which treat crime as the consequence of the convergence of a motivated offender, a vulnerable target and the absence of capable guardian, comes close to a real-life connotation of rural banditry in northern Nigeria. The paper recommends among others, the urgent need to ups the quality of good governance in order to address the human condition,

and that a collaboration among the leadership strata in the wider society must demonstrate sufficient commitment to compliment government efforts in a genuine governance project that seeks to emancipate Nigeria from her current sorry state.

Keywords

Banditry, Democratization, Development, Governance, Political Space, Security

1. Introduction

At the turn of the century, scholarly preoccupation with socio-political development particularly in Nigeria appeared to have dwelt more on the fulfillment of great expectations and much less on the uncertainties occasioned by a world in tremendous social flux. However, as social change became increasingly manifest, the concomitant uncertainties began to receive attention in the literature. The trajectory of this change began with the agitation for governance reform by a handful of citizens. This development came with its mixed bag of consequences in many states of Africa. Whereas some democracies have managed to consolidate or if you like, are still democratizing, a few others have relapsed into reverse wave or are caught up in what Thomas Carothers (2002) described as the 'gray zone'. The bad news for countries like Nigeria that has experienced almost a quarter-century of democratization, is the rising wave of atavistic consciousness or what Engels (cited in Campell, 1997), described as "the lowest instincts or passion in man", characterized by outright criminality that is increasingly becoming predominant in the liberal political space.

In specific terms, the new wave of dramatic reverses relates to terrorist attacks, ethnic violence, rural banditry, farmers/herders' imbroglio, cattle rustling, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery and unknown gunmen which are steady and present security challenges in Nigeria. The situation has become palpable such that criminal elements operating in every part of the country now constitute an existential threat. In the circumstance, there is falling respect for human rights, eroding commitments to alleviate poverty and deprivation, precipitating a looming crisis of legitimacy even for a government that supposedly derived its mandate from the people. In some parts of the northern region, bandits have taken over farm lands and major transit roads. Locals who dare to go to the farm and travelers who dare to hit the road are kidnapped for ransom or killed in the most lurid manner. Citizens have lost faith in government as marauders and brigands now reign supreme over what is described as ungoverned spaces in the region, and are demanding for the allegiance of locals to their illegitimate authority. The implication of this sorry state of affairs is that, the constitutional responsibility of the state has suffered neglect, prompting a convergence of expert opinions that Nigeria is fast degenerating into a failed state. This failure implies *the loss of physical control of its territory; (its) monopoly on the legitimate use of force; the erosion of (its) legitimate authority to make collective decisions; and ability to provide reasonable public service…These negative trends in crosscutting conditions become the path to failure* (Kinan et al., 2011, pp. 9 & 67).

Although Nigeria, like any other contemporary state in transition, is not immune to the dysfunction associated with social change, the dimension it has taken at the onset of the democratization process, suggests that part of the explanations for the macabre security situation in Nigeria today can be located in the declining state capacity vis-a-vis a permissive liberal political environment. This observation is given fillip by the Routine Activity Theory by Cohen and Felson (1979). They submit that crime is encouraged by the convergence of a motivated offender, an attractive target and the absence of capable guardianship. Whereas a motivated offender is an individual who is capable and willing to commit crime, an attractive target is a person that is considered vulnerable on account of location, situation or the specificity of crime. Capable guardianship refers to a person that can prevent crime from occurring. The underlying assumptions of this theoretical perspective provide a real-life connotation of rural banditry in northern Nigeria. We shall return to this later. However, it is helpful from the onset, to isolate and reflect on the third element of crime insinuated in the theory—absence of capable guardian. Given the existing weak institutions and policies in Nigeria, absence of capable guardian refers to state institutional inertia to prevent crime. To this end, it is arguable that liberal political environment has produced a declining state capacity to secure the lives and properties of Nigerians. If the drawback of many other festering democracies is their failure to deliver basic services to the people, the lack of state capacity to guarantee the freedom and secure her people from danger, or threats to a nation's ability to protect and develop itself, is the most fundamental pitfall of contemporary Nigerian state.

Today, there is an impressive scholarly articulation of the nuances and prognosis of contemporary security challenges in Nigeria (Bartolla, 2011; CDD, 2015; Council on Foreign Relations, 2016; International Crisis Group, 2017; Vitus, Abiola, & Victor, 2019; Okoli, 2019; UNHCR, 2020; Udozen, 2021) and a host of others. While scholarly preoccupation has remained ceaseless, the audacity and frightening dimensions of violent criminal enterprise in Nigeria is also un-abating. One dimension of this criminality that confounds the sensibility of local governance is rural banditry. Although not entirely new to humanity in recorded history, Liman (2018), has observed that predating colonialism in Africa, nondescript bandits were noted to have raided wayfarers and merchants travelling along local economic roads. However, what we have today are organized criminal gangs whose intermittent assaults on rural people and their livelihood is a present and enduring danger. The abiding concern of this paper is to further escalate these scholarly conversations by scoping the infamy of rural banditry with particular reference to northern Nigeria. In doing so, it seeks to interrogate the drivers of this phenomenon that has remained implacable over the last fifteen years or so. The paper is organized into seven sections. Section one is the introduction which has been undertaken here. Section two is on the methodology of study. Section three provides a portrait of contemporary northern Nigeria. Section four problematizes the security situation in the region. Section five is on conceptual clarification of rural banditry. Section six takes the disquisition further to discuss the findings under specific thematic areas, namely; poverty, social

exclusion, ungoverned space and *almajiranchi* as drivers of rural banditry in northern Nigeria. Section seven offers the concluding remarks and recommendations.

2. Objectives/Methodology

There is a broad consensus in the literature that the process of social change is often interspersed with disaffection. This disaffection is not only symptomatic of open society which democracy promotes; it is also a testament to the dynamism of contemporary societies in transition. Thus, the democratization process in Nigeria offers a unique experience that preoccupies scholars to examine this disaffection within the context of national security environment. To this end, the objectives of this paper are; (i) to offer a perspective on the national security problematics, and particularly (ii) to scope the infamy of rural banditry in northern Nigeria. To realize these objectives, the paper adopts a methodology that is both descriptive and analytical. The approach relies on official records and a considerable volume of literature that has been churned out in the last couple of years. In respect of official records, the study examines the reports of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the National Social Safety Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO), International Crisis Group, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the Oxford Poverty Human Development Initiative (OPHDI), the World Bank, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The review of literature considers a wide range of scholarly perspectives on the subject matter of study.

3. Contemporary Northern Nigeria

Contemporary northern Nigeria is a product of interesting historical epochs. Therefore, any meaningful discussion on the security problematic in the region today should be preceded by brief remarks on her pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial antecedents. First, the region was a formidable pre-colonial state with all the trappings of traditional administrative system. At the onset of colonial rule, the region offered a pliable political environment for the operationalization of the British contraption of indirect rule. It is arguable that the success of this contraption in the north lies at the heart of British imperial rule over what is until today called Nigeria. The enduring consequence of this success has provided leverage in regional politics right from colonial period. The amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates in 1914 which formed the nucleus that birthed Nigeria has remained the most referenced in the literature of British imperial rule in West Africa. History was made in what pundits variously described as; "the mistake of 1914", "the marriage of convenience between two disparate ethnic groups", "a system of forced brotherhood and sisterhood". These uncharitable sobriquets described a nation in the throes of socio-political upheavals characterized by deep-seated schism between the two regions that were brought together. While memories of these historical epoch have, to borrow the words of Wole Soyinka (2003),

"receded into the obscurity of time", it nonetheless lies at the heart of the problematic of nation building today.

Perhaps the significance of the north to Nigeria's colonial background is not complete without noting the decisive influence of the region on the various constitutional conferences and debates that culminated into her independence in 1960. Of particular note is the motion for self-government in 1956 moved by the Action Group of western Nigeria which was replaced by another motion with the words "…as soon as practicable" by the leader of the Northern Peoples' Congress. The sharp division between the two regions provided the impetus for the fragile federal constitutional arrangement and the concomitant inexorable national question. Although, no region was spared in the constitutional crisis that ensued, nonetheless, it provided a background that led to the emergence of a formidable and dominant northern Nigeria at independence in 1960. Till date, the northern region consists of three quarter of the land area and more than half of the population of Nigeria (Bello & Adesina, 2019). Out of the 36 states of the federation, the north has 19. Following the report of the 1994 constitutional conference, Nigeria was disaggregated into six geo-political zones, namely; North-Central, North-West, North-East, South-West, South-South, and South-East, with the Federal Capital Territory located in the North-Central. Thus, in an effort to understand the security challenge in northern Nigeria (especially the phenomenon of rural banditry), time and space should be devoted to examine the region in terms of some salient attributes of her political, economic and cultural environment.

The north is the largest region in Nigeria, making up to 70% of the country's total land mass of 910,770sq. Km (World Bank, 2020). The 2016 estimate by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), indicates that Northern Nigeria has a population of 100,894,453, while Southern Nigeria with 17 states has a population of 89,041,961. The Federal Capital Territory has 3,564, 126 people (NBS, 2016). Based on the projections of the latest United Nations data, the population of Nigeria is 218,601,314 (UN, 2022). Given the annual population growth rate of 2.5% as at 2020 (World Bank, 2021), it is almost certain that Northern Nigeria's share of the annual increase in the last six years is proportionate to the 2016 estimate. Perhaps, the most interesting part of the demography of the region is the numerous ethnic groups. There are over 160 ethnic groups with Hausa/Fulani being the dominant and constituting over 30% of the population (Vanguard, 2017).
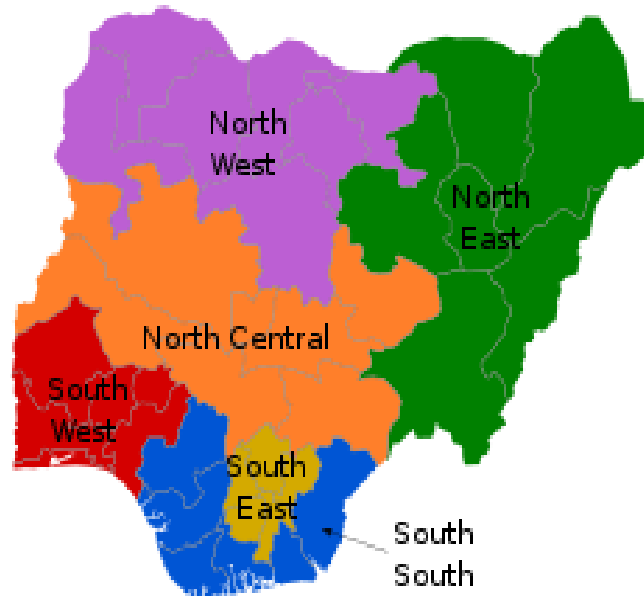
Figure 1. **Map of Nigeria with the Six Geo-political Zones**

Islam is the dominant religion in the north. In terms of arts and culture, the Muslim majority Hausa, Fulani and Kanuri ethnic stocks showcase unique attributes albeit heavily diluted by the dominant Islamic culture. This can be noticed in the admixture of religious practices and tradition in their costume, dance, medicine and a variety of other cultural practices. However, northern Nigeria is also home to a significant number of Christian minorities who are scattered all over the three geo-political zones, but mostly concentrated in the north-central. In terms of education, northern Nigeria lags behind the other parts of the country. Historically, the northern part of the country had a well-rooted Islamic education system prior to British imperial rule and therefore saw western education as alien and capable of supplanting Islam and all it represents (Ibenegbu, 2017). For these reasons, there was a deliberate policy of discouraging western education in preference for Islamic education. Perhaps, the hang-over of this lack of enthusiasm largely explains the low level of western education in the north. Thus, the region has the lowest indicators in literacy, school enrolment levels and success rate in national examinations (The Guardian, 2017).

On the cross-cutting issues of politics and economy, contemporary northern Nigeria is a compelling case study. The north carried her colonial prodigy into the politics of post-colonial Nigeria. In a federal constitutional arrangement in 1960, the north retained her position of prime minister since 1957. By 1963 when Nigeria became a Republic, the north continued with the more powerful position of prime minister who was also the executive head of government. Despite the prolonged regional hostility occasioned by ethnic competitiveness, educational and economic imbalances, the north was still in a vantage position in the power calculus. The January 15, 1966 military coup attempted to change the power equation, but a counter coup in July 29 of the same year returned power to the north. After 13 sad years of military

interregnum characterized by a civil war, a successful coup in July, 1975 and a foiled counter coup in February, 1976, the Second Republic was ushered in with the north producing the first Executive President. However, the Second Republic was truncated by yet another military coup in 1983, and for 16 straight years, the leadership of Nigeria remained in the north. The Fourth Republic commenced in May 29, 1999 with an initial shift in regional power relation, especially the narrative of northern political dominance. Thus, within the first 24 years of civil rule in the Fourth Republic (1999-2023), the north produced two Presidents for the country. It therefore means that, the return to democracy was a sobering experience for a preponderance of politicians in northern Nigeria, especially when the region has lost control of political power at the center (International Crisis Group, 2010). The new generation of political elite in the north now assumes a consciousness that transcends decades of northern hegemony - a hegemony that hitherto made political consensus building seamless.

Until the turn of the century, there was a common refrain that the north is imbued with the sagacity to retain political power while the main stay of the economy is located in the south. Today, the narrative has changed. However, before the economic transformation of the 1970s and 1980s, northern Nigeria was noted for her comparative advantage in agriculture especially cash crops. For example, eleven of thirteen cotton producing states are in the north. This provided the backward integration that fed the thriving textile industry in the region. The famous groundnut pyramids in the north were a significant part of the Nigerian economy and viewed as both a tourist attraction and a symbol of wealth. Although, not the only region that produces groundnuts, the north accounts for more than 80% of the total groundnuts production in Nigeria (see groundnuts producing states, 2020). The list (which is by no means exhaustive) of other cash crops produced in commercial quantity in the north, includes; yam, sorghum, millet, maize, rice, cowpea (beans), potatoes, cotton (Obialo, 2020). The shift to oil dependent mono-cultural economy dealt a fatal blow to the rural economy of northern Nigeria. The Petrodollar that furnished the manufacturing industries and service sector in Nigeria had minimal impact on the economy of the north. Although the north still boasts of being the food center of the country, this claim is being extenuated by climate change. Desertification, drought and perennial flooding are taking their toll on the environmental resourcefulness of the region. The ongoing oil prospecting in the region may provide a respite, but there is the lack of skilled man power; where a preponderance of young persons in the region are not adequately equipped to partake meaningfully in a knowledge driven economy.

4. Problematizing Security in Nigeria

Contemporary articulation of the pervasive insecurity in Nigeria (especially in the northern region) has produced a complex mesh of varying interpretations. While some pundits have concentrated on ancient animosity resurrected by ethno-religious sentiment, others have situated the malaise in the fault lines of a fragile federation. There are yet some in the same enterprise who have chosen to go beyond the factor of convoluted diversity to seek explanation in the worsening human condition occasioned by the

increasing parlous governance situation in the country. The writers contend that these perspectives in their combination are germane and therefore helpful in an effort to understand the problematic of insecurity in Nigeria. In others words, to gain deeper insight into the current state of affairs, a synthesis of these perspectives is instructive to the extent that each perspective underscores the changing dimension of insecurity in terms of the pattern, actors and instrument.

On ethno-religious sentiment that has snowballed into some sort of self-immolation (especially in northern Nigeria), the International Crisis Group (2010), observes that it is a product of several complex and inter-locking factors, including a volatile mix of historical grievances and political manipulation. The Group argues that:

> With religion increasingly informing public debate, the risk of polarization has increased. Some Christian preachers openly portray Islam in negative light. This includes detailed refutations of the Quran and denigration of specific practices. Some Muslims have replied in kind, for example through detailed analysis designed to show the errors of the Bible, leading to highly dangerous and protracted tit for tat polemics (ICG, 2010, p. 13).

While these stereotyping are considered insulting to the religious sensibilities of both Muslims and Christians, more often than not, the state has done little to contain the brewing hostility such that the violence it engenders has repercussions on community relations nationwide. Beyond the Muslim/Christian divide, there are other variants of crisis-inducing rivalry. For example, there have also been intra-religious conflicts between Islamic sects such as: the *Sunni*, the *Shia*, the *Izala*, the *Tijannyya* and more recently, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria; anti-establishment Islamic groups; and the indigenes/settler's imbroglio in long established communities. Thus, inter-group relation has been characterized by tepidity, jaded tolerance and intermittent hostility. More than any other predisposing condition to insecurity, the puzzling currents of ethno-religious hostility and intra-religious contradictions stand between the people and peaceful co-existence in northern Nigeria.

The fault lines of Nigeria's federal constitutional framework have received significant clarifications in the literature. Perhaps what is new is the extent to which the democratization process has exacerbated these fault lines, prompting a growing consensus that liberal democracy has raised identity consciousness and resentment about the structural deficiency of the federal system (Ozohu-Suleiman, 2007). In the circumstance, the democratization process has engendered an open society that enables people to deploy their constitutional right of democratic citizenship, where pent up frustration found vent in the democratic space. To this end, the national question resurrected with threatening resilience, with regional political elite orchestrating the call for restructuring of the federation. While this may be considered as a healthy development (to the extent that the debates on restructuring are patriotic and issue-driven), the reality however, is that the mistrust that characterized the engagement has assumed violent dimension. Thus:

> From 2004, armed movements through the formation of secessionist and ethnic militias became visible on the political space…the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) in the south-east, the Boko Haram, seeking to establish an Islamic Caliphate in the north, the Odua People's Congress seeking to establish an Oduduwa Republic in the south-west, and the Niger Delta Volunteer Force (NDVF) demanding for resource control/Independent Niger Delta region, took over the liberal political Space to advance their agitations (Ibori & Ozohu-Suleiman, 2021, p. 4).

However, it is regrettable to note that the foregoing regional agendas are being pursued at the detriment of national security and citizens' welfare. It has been argued elsewhere that the empirical nexus between the national question and nation building is fluid…to the extent of this fluidity; the national question is not only a reflection of the challenges associated with efforts to collapse a plural society into an organic state for political stability and viability, but also a mechanism to interrogate progress in good governance (Ozohu-Suleiman & Liberty, 2020). In the light of this contention, the conventional treatment of the national question leaves much to be desired. The question that is pertinent is; does the national question as presently framed by the governing elite take into account the dwindling capacity of the state to develop policies, the ability to produce and deliver public goods and services? (Omotola, 2016). This poser takes us to the third perspective on the problematic of insecurity in Nigeria; the parlous governance situation. When Nigeria was recently described as the poverty capital of the world, the undiscerning mind took it as a politically motivated statement, but in scholarly parlance, the hyperbole is a sad commentary on the poor quality of public administration. Today almost every indicator of development underscores the worsening human condition in Nigeria. She ranks an abysmal 161 position out of the 189 countries in Human Development Index (HDI), with HDI value of 0.539 and life expectancy put at 54.7 (UNDP, 2020). According to the Word Bank (2022) estimate, the number of poor people in Nigeria is 95.1 million, representing 43% of the population. In terms of Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), as percentage contribution to overall poverty of deprivation, Nigeria has 30.9% in health, 28.2% in education and 40% in standard of living (UNDP, 2020). The MPI identifies multiple overlapping deprivations in the three dimensions of health, education and standard of living. As at 2021, the unemployment rate was 32.5% with projected figure of over 33% in 2022. The National Bureau of Statistics reported that unemployment for people aged 15 to 24 stood at 53.4% and at 37.2% for people aged 25 to 34 (NBS, 2022).

The tenacity of the foregoing perspectives underscores the problematic of insecurity in Nigeria. Religion, ethnicity and poor governance in their combination have nurtured an enabling environment for the convergence of the three essential elements of crime that we alluded to earlier in the chapter. Whereas the offender is motivated by ethno-religious sentiments and/or a convoluted diversity and poor governance regime, the lack of state capacity to stem the tide has led to the free reign of criminal enterprise in Nigeria. However, it might be helpful to consider the claim by some of these criminal

elements that the fight for survival was the primary motivating factor to take arms against the state. To this end, Michael Renner in his book; *Fighting for Survival* argues that:

> To gain better understanding of the nature of conflict, we need to look beyond the easy excuse of 'ancient hatred' and 'tribal bloodletting' to detect the underlying stress factors that help cause fighting…disputes are often sharpened or even triggered by glaring social and economic inequities - explosive conditions that are exacerbated by the growing pressures of population control, resource depletion and environmental degradation" (Renner cited in Campell, 1997).

We shall return to this in our discussion of rural banditry and poverty/social exclusion in northern Nigeria. However, it is instructive to note that these multiples lenses capture a despondent picture of a post-transition state in the labyrinth of social flux.

5. Rural Banditry: A Conceptual Disquisition

Etymologically, the term banditry is associated with criminal act that involves intermittent attack by hoodlums at the fringe of human communities in the early part of the 19th century. Initially, banditry had three defining attributes: (i) it was associated with agrarian and/or pastoral communities; (ii) it was nondescript (meaning that it had no particular distinguishing characteristics); and (iii) the act of criminality thrived on limited policing jurisdictions. It is instructive to note also that, in spatial connotation, banditry is common to every part of the world. However, with the passage of time, banditry has evolved into a more organized and weaponized criminal enterprise with a variety of patterns of operations often dictated by location, targets and motive. Against this backdrop, we can offer a more generalized definition and then proceed to a country-specific-definition of the term banditry. On a general note, banditry refers to the criminal act of raiding and attacking vulnerable people by an armed group, whether or not premeditated, using weapons of offence or defense, especially in semi-organized groups for the purpose of overpowering the victim (Shalangwa, 2013). This conception of banditry applies to all climes. For example, it provides insights into nondescript bandits who operate on mountainous parts of some parts of the Asian continent (Cassia, 2009). A conception of banditry that is more specific to Nigerian experience describes it as criminal enterprise like cattle rustling, kidnapping, armed robbery, drug abuse, arson, rape and the brazen and gruesome massacre of people in agrarian communities with sophisticated weapons (Uche & Uwuamadi cited in peter, 2020).

There are growing numbers of outlaws who are involved in these illicit activities (especially in the vast rural areas of northern Nigeria). Thus, the use of rural to qualify banditry suggests two peculiarities of the criminal enterprise, namely; (i) the outlaws operate on the fringe of rural setting from where they launch attack on vulnerable people, (ii) the outlaws assume the character of hermits who are withdrawn and live in scarcely ungoverned hinterlands, forestlands and borderlines, albeit with sinister motive.

However, in the wake of widespread insecurity in Nigeria, bandit criminality is fast assuming urban character. There are reports of attacks by the dare devils in major cities across the country. Therefore, to gain further insight into the phenomenon of banditry, a typology has been developed by Okoli and Ugwu, (2019) to address the question of motive, form, autonomy and operational mode. To this end, we have: (i) social banditry that is motivated by the intent to protest social inequality; (ii) mercenary and/or autonomous banditry perpetrated by auxiliaries working for a principal in an agent- principal relationship, while autonomous bandits are self-motivated and personally commissioned; (iii) organized banditry thrives on a network of actors that are syndicated while petty banditry is perpetrated by unorganized individuals or groups; (iv) roving bandits are itinerant while stationary bandits are sedentary; and (v) maritime bandits popularly referred to as 'pirates' operate offshore. Irrespective of these forms, banditry (whether rural, semi-urban or urban), refers to violent crimes that involve the use of force, or threat to that effect, to intimidate a person or group of persons in order to rob, inflict injury and/or kill (Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014).

6. Discussion

Poverty and Rural Banditry: Although statistics on the prevailing poverty incidence in Nigeria is fluid, the 2016 World Bank Report, estimated that 87% of all poor people in Nigeria are in the north while the south has 12%. In a study undertaken to determine the geo-political distribution of poverty incidence in northern Nigeria, Jaiyeola (2021), established that north-east and north-west zones have 77.7% and 76.3% respectively, and 67.5% is in the north-central. In a recent collaborative survey (2022) by the NBS, the National Social Safety-Nets Coordinating Office (NASSCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), there are over 133 million multidimensionally poor Nigerians. Sixty five percent (65%) of this figure (86 million people) live in the north, while 35% (about 47 million) live in the south. In scoping the incidence of poverty in northern Nigeria, predisposing conditions such as the high level of unemployment, the abysmal school enrollment at all levels, the harsh economic environment that has continually weakened the informal sector, and the precarious socio-ecological condition all combined to promote a culture of poverty in the region; a culture of failure that breeds resentment, disaffection and hostility. However, the most telling of these predisposing conditions is the ecological dynamic as it relates to climate change. Inadequate surface and rain water, receding arable land and the scourge of deforestation have combined to give impetus to resource-induced banditry. In a study conducted by Centre for Democracy and Development (2015), it was observed that, *the phenomenon of desertification, declining water points and foliage, shrinking arable land and population movements have all dramatically affected the means of livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of farmers and pastoralists.* In rural Zamfara for example, Hausa and Fulani are fighting over land and water and the crisis has been escalated by crippling poverty.

If the foregoing is considered as natural phenomena for which the state lacks the capacity to address, the widespread poverty it engenders is further exacerbated by a governance regime that is not in touch with the people. Thus, there is a growing consensus that the implacable banditry in northern Nigeria is a design by the poverty-stricken rural population to vent their spleen on a society that has deprived them. This perspective concentrates on the socio-economic context that nurtures crime and deviant behavior (Ejiofor, 2022). A preponderance of poor people resides in the rural areas. A handful of them trickle into the city in search of livelihood where they see the other side of the social divide in a society of affluence and affliction. The bare face of poverty is unmistakable in the region:

> Street children with large, doleful brown eyes, wielding plastic begging bowls, looking like they had just stepped out of a Dickensian novel set-in tropical squalor, are omnipresent…in the northeast and northwest, the scale of poverty is significantly greater. More than three-quarters of the population of these two regions lives in "absolute poverty"; i.e., at the minimum necessary to sustain human life (Hansen, 2016, p. 83).

Today, many of these children of the street have grown into young adults and have departed the streets into the forests to take arms yet in search of livelihood. At the strategic level of the military establishment, there is a perspective supported by evidence from research findings (see Ezigbo, 2021) that kinetic force will only swell the rank of outlaws who are daily recruited from the army of deprived young adults on the streets. Addressing the push factor of poverty would provide a sustainable respite from banditry. This perspective speaks volumes when considered against the backdrop of the resilience of the dare devils that attach no value to human life and are motivated by the ill-informed motive of fighting for survival.

Social Exclusion and Rural Banditry: Social exclusion as a causal factor for deviant behavior is gaining currency in the literature of widespread insecurity in developing countries (Birchal, 2019; Khan, Combaz, & Frazer, 2015; Douma, 2006). Beyond the consideration of material wellbeing, scholars are looking at the historical legacy of social fragmentation that fosters group hostility against the state. *Group differences are not enough in themselves to cause conflicts, but social exclusion and horizontal inequalities provide fertile ground for violent mobilization* (Khan, Combaz, & Frazer, 2015). Social exclusion is a state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in the economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such state. Although, social exclusion and poverty are intertwined and therefore mutually reinforcing, they are distinct from each other; not all members of a socially disadvantaged groups are economically disadvantaged (United Nations, 2016). It is therefore instructive to note that the rural economy of some of the communities that serve as harbinger for bandits is averagely supportive of their livelihood. However, such communities are locked out of other imperatives of meaningful life. Such imperatives encompass socio-cultural and political dimensions of life. In this context, Birchall (2019), observes that social exclusion increases poverty by

reducing groups' access to vital services such as health, education, social protection and livelihood opportunities. At the same time, poverty increases social exclusion when the cost of accessing these services is out of the reach of groups. One glaring example of social exclusion is lack of voice and political representation which gave rise to a feeling of neglect by locals living in expansive rural communities. While this form of social exclusion should not be mistaken for the growing number of ungoverned spaces in northern Nigeria, it is yet a precursor to it. The feeling of abandonment has encouraged criminally minded locals to retreat into the forest to take arms against the state.

In a recent television documentary by BBC entitled; *The Bandit Warlords of Zamfara*, the world was taken into the inner recess of the infamy where the global media organization showcased the dare devils and reported their grievances against the state. The documentary also captured a handful of victims who narrated their ordeal in the bandit enclaves. The gory motion picture is reminiscent of the Hobbesian state of nature where *life was nasty, brutish and short*. It was reported that *there are 30,000 bandits split into around 100 heavily armed gangs*. Since its foray into the airwave, the documentary has provoked reactions from the Nigerian government who saw the documentary as condemnable as it has only given undue publicity to the bandits. This official position was corroborated in a scathing rebuke by a veteran journalist and television anchor, Kadaria Ahmed. She argues that journalists should be circumspect in reporting banditry as its concomitant publicity provides the oxygen for the criminal enterprise. In the rebuke which was interpolated with scholarly authorities, Ahmed (2022) avers that …it *is hard to see how this will not contribute to deepening fear, mistrust, hopelessness and damage to the national psyche while undoubtedly helping with the recruitment, all ingredients that actively contribute to successful outcomes for terror groups.* While this observation is palpable, public opinion is divided as to whether the citizens deserve to know about the enemies within.

The documentary did not only unearth the bandits' underworld, but also gave them a window to voice out their grievances. It revealed that the Hausa and Fulani bandits in these enclaves are illiterates and therefore cannot engage with legitimate authority. The leaders of the criminal gangs who spoke before the camera in Hausa language were vehement in their disaffection with the state. They accused the establishment of utter neglect. Their lives are however characterized by frequent drug abuse and *contempt for the Nigerian state.* They complain of the absence of social amenities like hospitals and schools. Perhaps on account of their illiteracy and rustic way of life, they lack the capacity to attract media attention. *They see violence as the only way to draw the attention of government.* If Nigerian citizens (some of who are victims of these dare devils) hitherto see them as men from another planet (in a world of their own), not anymore; they are ordinary men with arguable claim to their own story. It is also arguable that the lack of participation in society that characterizes the lives of the outlaws is itself a consequence of conflict, i.e., farmers/herders' conflict. While admitting that government should take responsibility for social inclusion in the distribution of values, it is inconceivable to extend that to an environment of armed insurrection against the state. This argument takes us to the perspective of lack of

government presence in a good number of the expansive rural settings or what is now referred to as "ungoverned spaces" or "governance void" in northern Nigeria. Although, treated separately in this paper, social exclusion and ungoverned spaces are not mutually exclusive. While the latter refers to the absence of government institutions, it contributes (in the long run) to the incidence of social exclusion.

Ungoverned Space and Rural Banditry: Scholarly nuances of the notion of "ungoverned space" became notable following the United States diplomatic maneuvers on radical Islamists conflict in some parts of south Asia. The then United States Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, labeled the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderland as falling outside the purview of government control. The region was viewed as an ungoverned space either because of the state of anarchy that was prevalent at the time or a sobriquet to describe a no 'man's land'. Thus, the notion of ungoverned space *suggests a territory that is experiencing a vacuum of political order and requires either insertion of new or emplacement of prior structures of governance* (Marsden & Hopkin, 2012). In Nigeria, this governance void had been in existence before the country became embroiled in the current manifold security challenge. In other words, the phenomenon of ungoverned space is not an incipient attribute of rurality in Nigeria. The pattern, actors and instruments of Boko Haram in particular and rural banditry generally in northern Nigeria have created public awareness of the existence of ungoverned space and brought it into the front burner of scholarly discourse. In the local context, ungoverned space is:

> A place where the state or central government is unable or unwilling to extend control, effectively govern or influence the local population, and where a provincial, local, tribal, or autonomous government does not fully or effectively govern, due to inadequate governance capacity, insufficient political will, gaps in legitimacy, the presence of conflict, or restrictive norms of behavior (Taylor, 2016).

If the literature on dwindling capacity of the state to develop policies, implement and deliver public goods and services has swelled, the question of governance void and its implications for the parlous security situation in Nigeria is an overwhelming new perspective to an already over flogged scholarly terrain. However, the phenomenon of ungoverned space is fluid and therefore contemporary articulation of the notion is contested. Clunan, cited in Ojo (2020, p. 83), argues that ungoverned space transcends state failure or government absence in an area. It connotes: *A primordial existence of ethnic and tribal hierarchies, with their embedded customs and laws; Land populated by traditional nomadic tribes; Presence of informal economies; Criminals; Religious authorities. Thus,* Leonard-Fwa (2022), cautioned that, there is need to de-emphasize the notion of ungoverned space based on the absence of state authority and shift attention to the idea of "softened sovereignty." He argues that, the global diffusion of multiple waves of Western liberal ideology and its technologies have reduced the world to softened sovereignties, where competitions over authority are commonplace and the state does not corner the governance sphere. With the inception of the Internet, and global finance, ungoverned spaces have arisen as a result of the

deliberate laxity of state regulation in response to the spread of neo-liberal policy prescriptions in the late twentieth century. Be that as it may, a primary goal of the State authority is to improve the "effectiveness of our sovereignty" in order to deny sanctuary to terrorists, bandits, unknown-gunmen, proliferators, narco-traffickers, and gangsters. Thus, the debates on the notion of ungoverned space are characterized by; the level of state penetration of the society, the extent to which the state has monopoly on the use of force, the extent to which the state controls its border, and the question as to Whether the state is subject to external intervention by other states or outside forces (Yoroms, 2022).

The BBC documentary on *The Bandit Warlords of Zamfara* aptly illustrates these various dimensions of ungoverned space. The northern region has about 60% of the total land area of Nigeria with a large expanse of forest lands. The agricultural resourcefulness of this land mass cannot be overemphasized, as the region arguably prides itself as the food basket of the nation. However, the implacable security challenge in Nigeria is increasingly decimating the agricultural potentials of the north. Part of the vast expanse of arable land that is now considered as ungoverned space has been commandeered by bandit criminality. Thus, the hitherto thriving rural economy on this space is fast receding into the obscurity of history. The consequence is a desolate waste land dotted by criminal gangs. They portray the image of gun throttling and machete wielding savages baying for blood in the enclaves. Northern Nigeria has lost its pride of being the major producer of cash crops like groundnut, grains and vegetable of various descriptions. It was reported that about 78,120 farmers in Borno, Kastina, Taraba, Plateau and other states in the region have abandoned their farm land as a result of attacks by bandits (The Guardian, 2020). In rural Borno town of Jere, at least 110 rice farmers were attacked and killed by Boko Haram (Premium Times, 2020). The argument of Cunan, cited in Ojo (2020), which attempts to extenuate the failure of government on the prevalence of governance void, may be tenable if only for intellectual purpose, but it lacks empirical utility, in so far as the ungoverned space exists within the geographical boundary of the Nigerian state. This raises the question of the propriety of "embedded autonomy" insinuated in Cunan's definition.

The argument can be escalated further to seek explanation in the resource curse thesis propounded by the economic geographer, Richard Auty (1993). To begin with, the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is unequivocal on the mandate of the state to protect the territorial integrity of Nigeria as a country defined by geography, laws and people. Against the backdrop of this mandate, the notion of governance void highlights a particularly disturbing state failure with dire consequences for national security. Apart from crude oil deposits, the vast expanse of arable land constitutes a formidable capital resource for backward integration in the agricultural supply chain, contributing to national development. Thus, like the crude oil curse, the gross underutilization of this arable land and its predictable consequences on food security is itself, a resource curse. The easy excuse of *ungovernable space* (authors' emphasis) as the arguments seems to suggest, is not tenable. The point at issue is that the Nigerian state is becoming notorious for squandering the good will of nature. Governance void is created by the state criminal

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neglect of the local population. Such neglect manifests in the absence of road network, a law enforcement agency, health care and educational facilities, banking services, electricity and water, to mention just a few. In the circumstance, rural bandits *have employed the vulnerability of the local population and enfeebled community institutions to exploit and recruit teeming population of youths who are frustrated by formal governance system* (Ojo, 2020, p. 85). Moreover, the inadequate governance capacity which appears to have ceded a preponderance of rural economy to bandits has invariably frustrated the implementation of the agricultural promotion policy also known as "Green Alternative" as part of the economic diversification drive of the federal government.

***Almajiranchi* and Rural Banditry:** Islamic education in northern Nigeria has produced a puzzling outcome – the 'culture' of *almajiranchi.* However, a critical reflection will compel the discerning mind to ask; what manner of culture? To answer this question, a sparing clarification of the conventional meaning of culture and the 'culture' of *almajiranchi* is imperative. A (UNESCO, 2001) declaration of cultural diversity defines culture as *the totality of unmistakable spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional qualities, which characterize a society or social group, and that culture includes forms of life, forms of communal living, value system, traditions and beliefs*. Etymologically, the word *almajiranchi is* employed to describe a system of Islamic education that is prevalent in northern Nigeria. The Hausa word *almajiri* is derived from the Arabic expression *almuhajir*; which describes a sojourner in search of Islamic knowledge*.* Like the culture of a people, this practice has become an integral part of the *spiritual, material* and *intellectual* lives, especially of the poor rural folks, who send their young children to urban and semi urban areas to learn the Quran under the apprenticeship of an Islamic teacher called *mallam.* It is estimated that majority of Nigeria's 13.2 million out-of-school children are trapped in this system. In Kano State for example, there are approximately 300,000 *almajirai* (Nextier SPD, 2020). Although, the search for knowledge in distant places is consistent with the teachings of Islam, the bad news is that, alms begging, which characterizes the lives of children (almajirai) in Quranic schools, is at variance with the values of hard work and subsistence of the religion of Islam. Thus, colloquially, *almajiri* describes a practice where children beg for alms on the streets. These innocent children in far-flung areas without parental care are left to the mercy of inclement weather and the vicissitude of life. As they line up the streets of major cities, they symbolize the bare face of child abuse in northern Nigeria, and the disgusting visage speaks volumes about the feckless governance in the region.

At some point, these children become young adults, and for those who are able to complete their studies, they have the option of remaining as urban underclass in a city life of penury and subservience. A significant number of them return back home to a lifeless rural economy characterized by governance void that fosters criminality. Whether in the city or rural area, these hapless *almajirai* struggles to survive amid the deep resentment they nurse against the society which compelled some of them to take to criminality. The call for the reform of the *almajiranchi* system has met with complacency owing to the obstinacy of what has become a way of life or the obvious preference of the governing elite to maintain

the parasitic-predator status quo. Either way, the consequences for the whole of society is costly. It is unarguable that some of the criminal gangs in the forests of northern Nigeria are products of this parasitic-predator system. Hansen (2016) observes that the insurgency in northern Nigeria is as much a class-based movement as it is a religious one—a movement that has received unofficial endorsement by the occasional defector from the more privileged class.

Much more than the obstinacy of a 'culture', the failed attempts to reform the *almajiranchi* system should be attributed to lack of state capacity to drive reform. The preference for Islamic education in northern Nigeria during the days of colonialism is a fact of history. This preference was not matched with a modicum of reform, perhaps because of the desire of imperial Britain to promote western education. However, it is sad to note that the rustic *almajiranchi* system has remained the same for over sixty years after independence. If knowledge is the motivation for *almajiranchi*, the absurdity of alms begging is detraction from a noble course. In a predominantly Muslim population of Malaysia, the reform of Islamic education has produced a system of boarding schools where children who enroll are admitted and taught Quran, Hadith and theology. The system has all the trappings of the formal school system of western education. On this note, Abubakar (2022) observes with dismay that, *the best Quran reciters from Nigeria that occasionally attend and win global Quran recitation competitions in Saudi and other countries aren't from the almajiris we see helplessly wandering the streets.* Thus, the lessons from other climes leave much to be desired from the Nigerian governing elite. Although a semblance of the Malaysian model is noticeable among the privileged class whose initiative has produced a handful of private Quranic schools, but as the name suggests, it is private to the extent that enrollment is reserved for children of the upper-class; while the under-class populate the *almajiranchi system*. This class division has already been entrenched in the formal school system of western education at primary and secondary school levels. It is also fast becoming evident at the tertiary education level in the wake of the liberalization of higher education (see Ozohu-Suleiman and Liberty, 2023).

The point at issue is not the dearth of reforms, but a lack of foresight and commitment on the part of government to drive reforms to its logical conclusion. The National Framework for the Development and Integration of Almajiri Education into the Universal Basic Education was a bold attempt to reform the *almajiranchi system* in recent time. The policy, which was implemented under the Jonathan administration, failed because of lack of collaboration with religious leaders, traditional institutions, civil society groups and faith-based organizations (Solomon, 2015). Moreover, the policy was not underpinned by an enduring legal framework. The Child Rights Act enacted in 2003 came close to the legal framework required. While 31 states of the federation have adopted the law, it is interesting to note that four states (Adamawa, Bauchi, Gombe and Zamfara) out of the 19 northern states are yet to domesticate the instrument (UNICEF, 2022). The reluctance to domesticate the instrument revolves around the contentious issues of religious doctrines and cultural practices. Even in the northern states that have

adopted this instrument, it is regrettable to note that the Child Rights Act has not had the desired impact on the *almajiranchi* system.

7. Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

In the ceaseless conversations on the security challenges that confront Nigeria, it is not likely that anyone would be under the illusion that the situation is specific to the country, or that the situation pertains only to developing climes. While admitting that the situation is more palpable with astonishing dimensions in countries like Nigeria with weak governance capacity, it is nonetheless a global phenomenon. This phenomenon is arguably an attribute of the 21st century that is characterized by tremendous social change across continents. This change came with its contradictions and uncertainties. While the underlying problematic differs from one clime to the other, the fact remains that the world is in distress. Bearing in mind the scarcely predictable turn of events that the century has for humanity, there is a sense in which the millennium can be considered as having generated outcomes that have had tremendous impact on Africa. Three examples of these outcomes are instructive here. The century has witnessed the height of deconstruction of authoritarian rule and the emergence of democracy. The century has witnessed the rise of multilateralism which has significantly altered the bargaining position of African states in international politics. The century has witnessed the new scramble for Africa in the wake of the global triumph of capitalism. Of particular interest in this paper is the deconstruction of authoritarian rule which came with perhaps, unintended consequences. For Nigeria, the puzzling flip side of liberal democracy is the rising wave of identity consciousness and group self-determination in a political environment of complex diversity.

As these developments unfold, the mandate of scholars is to understand and interpret humanity's lived experience in terms of their causes, consequences and implications for society. This paper has made a modest contribution to this scholarly preoccupation. In navigating through the mounting literature on the subject matter, the experience has been that of bold relieve that the security debacle (especially the phenomenon of rural banditry) has been the subject of scholarly lenses. Perhaps, the point of departure in this modest effort is the emphasis on the specific socio-political and economic conditions that have continually provided the enabling environment for rural banditry to thrive in northern Nigeria. In scoping these specific socio-political and economic conditions, effort is not spared to determine how they connect ultimately to the question of governance deficit in the region. Therefore, national consciousness has significantly shifted from the fantasies of liberal democracy (or what we referred to earlier in the paper as the crisis of great expectations), to widespread trepidation about what the future holds for the country in the face of this security debacle. In projecting into the future, the inescapable question that begs for answers is the predatory governance elite and how it has served to create the social puzzle of affluence and afflictions. However, beyond the narrative of a warped national and regional leadership, the question

of followership inertia is also inescapable, because leadership is a reflection of the society that produced it.

The question of weak state capacity represents a clarion call for the governing elite to ups the quality of good governance. However, good governance or the lack of it is a whole of society project. The discussion in this paper has underscored the sense in which leadership at informal level cannot be absolved of the subsisting security debacle in Nigeria. This informal leadership, especially as it concerns proper indoctrination by parents at the family unit, has been regrettably absent. Thus, in charting the way forward, a proactive state institution is required to inspire leadership at societal level. A collaborative approach also requires that the various non-governmental leadership strata in the wider society (including but not limited to religious, traditional, professional, philanthropic organizations and the labor movement) must demonstrate sufficient patriotism to compliment government efforts in a genuine governance project of emancipating Nigeria from the current sorry state.

Acknowledgement

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